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ABSTRACT

Outdoor education is often delivered through games and activities such as nature hikes or observing an ecosystem within a 1-foot circle on the ground. Often, participants look closely at the earth only for that brief moment. Wilderness survival is another way to teach about the outdoors. It offers skills that encourage participants to become more interactive with nature by observing it and participating in it. For example, the "bow drill" fire will teach about trees; cordage from plant fibers or tea made from leaves, roots, bark, or needles will teach about plants; and sleeping in a debris hut will teach about animals. Outdoor educators can use the teaching method known as "coyote teaching." The coyote in much of Native lore is known as the trickster. The coyote teacher role is to inspire and trick students into looking more closely at their surroundings by answering questions with questions that push students to find the answer on their own. When asked "what tree is that," the coyote teacher asks the student what does the bark look like, or are the branches opposite or alternate, and concludes by handing the student a field guide to trees so they can learn it for themselves. Coyote teaching is a simple and continual process that shifts the responsibility of learning from the educator to the student. (TD)

Wilderness Survival and Outdoor Education

By

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Abstract

It has been said that wilderness survival is the doorway to the Earth. If this statement is true, then wilderness survival should be a very effective way to teach outdoor education. Whether you are teaching children or college students, wilderness survival skills can be used to bring people closer to the earth. For example, the "bow drill" fire will teach you about the trees; cordage from plant fibers will teach you about the world of plants; tea made from leaves, roots, bark, or needles will also teach about plants; and, sleeping in a debris hut will teach you about the animals. This paper will outline how to incorporate wilderness survival skills into outdoor education programs and how to implement teaching through questioning.

Introduction

We often think of wilderness survival from a fear or emergency point of view; it is something only to be used when your life is on the line and you have no other hope to stay alive. In this paper, we will look at wilderness survival as an enjoyable way to become closer to the earth and as primitive living skills. We will focus on how to use these skills as a teaching tool for outdoor education.

Outdoor education is many times administered through games and activities such as nature hikes or observing an ecosystem within a one-foot circle on the ground. Often, the end result is that the participants look more closely at the earth only for that brief moment. The use of wilderness survival offers another way to get to the same end result. It offers a skill that will encourage the participants to become more interactive with nature by observing it and participating in it. This method permits the participant to walk away from the experience with something to show or teach to others.

Environmental outdoor education programs, as well as adventure outdoor education programs, will find that by using wilderness survival skills such as bow drill, a primitive fire-starting technique, participants will not only learn to use a knife properly and to make fire by friction, but also they will learn the trees around them in a much more personal way. The smell, touch, look, and location of a certain tree will become very much a part of this lesson. Many of the lessons taught in wilderness survival tend to reach far beyond that of the initial lesson. Wilderness survival provides opportunities for students or participants to develop a deeper relationship with the earth through guided observation and participation in the natural world around them.

Learning how to care for major needs such as shelter, water, fire, and food in the wilderness can give individuals a strong sense of security wherever they are.

As an outdoor educator, teaching people about the outdoors can become a lesson in itself. A common question asked of outdoor educators is "What tree is that?" or something similar. The outdoor educator reveals the answer, only to be asked the same question again and again. We, as outdoor educators, can use these questions to teach our students how to learn. Answering questions with questions can do this very effectively. The question that you ask the student should help them find the answer on their own. The process of teaching with questions is discussed later in this paper. Examples of how to integrate wilderness survival skills into outdoor education activities help to articulate the significance of this perspective in the field.

Wilderness Survival Skills Integrated Into Outdoor Education Activities

Essentially outdoor educators are attempting to teach participants about science, history, empathy, respect, and a host of other lessons about the natural environment. Different activities will fit the needs of outdoor education programs, and it becomes the educator's responsibility to identify what activity meets these needs. As discussed above with the bow drill fire, many lessons can come from one activity. The same is true with many of the survival skills. These activities or skills help the participants to develop relationships with the natural world all around them. These relationships allow the participant to see into a world they have not been accustomed to in their daily lives.

When first starting with a group that is not accustomed to the natural environment, it is very common to notice that the participants have difficulty seeing the difference between common plants or trees. Many people refer to this as the "wall of green" or not having "plant eyes." With time participants can learn to see the differences between the plants, trees, birds, and animals, but first we must find ways to connect them to each through the activities that we provide. A good way to start developing this relationship with the plants is to make cordage, or rope, from plant fibers or the inner bark of a tree.

Trees and Plants

At the end of their growing season, many plants send their energy back down to their roots or seeds for next season to grow again. During the winter months the stalk of the plant will remain. Many of these stalks such as Dogbane, Milkweed, and Stinging Nettle are easily found and great to use with groups. The outer fiber or bark of these plants can be stripped off and twisted into cord. The same can be done with many types of trees such as Poplars, Aspens, Walnut, Basswood, and many more. This fiber within trees is found under the bark and is best found on dead-down wood. Participants learning cordage discover that plants can offer great things to them. Many will make jewelry or other gifts with their cordage. The lesson in this activity reaches far beyond learning how natives made rope. It can be used to discuss respectful harvesting of plants and giving thanks for what we use.

Now that the cordage has been made we have developed a relationship with that plant and potentially a need to look for it again and again. There is now something that sets that particular plant apart from the rest. Other activities that work well in developing relationships with the trees and plants are one match fire, primitive fire, basket making, and other types of crafts like dream catchers, god's eyes, and making tea from pine needles, mint, spice bush, or other similar sources.

Animals

Our society moves at a very fast pace. We walk faster than we need to and should. We jump from activity to activity or flip from channel to channel with little time spent moving slowly or sitting still. When we walk in the forest at this fast pace, the birds and animals get scared and run. We then see loads of birds flying up and away from us with the occasional white flag of a deer tail bounding away from us. Many of our participants may believe that this is the only way that animals act: always running from place to place.

In reality, animals conserve their energy by walking or moving in what is called base line, a slow moving gate with intentional movements. A simple stalking game is an activity that demonstrates this lesson. To do a stalking game, one person sits on the ground with keys in front of them. The role of the rest of the group is to slowly and quietly move toward the sitter, take the keys, and then move back to starting place without being heard. The sitter must point to those that they hear to send them back to the start place. Before or after the game is started you can assign animals to small groups where they research their animals and learn what their major senses might be and learn to walk as they would walk. For example, bears are pace walkers, and so they move both left feet forward then both right feet. After learning how bears walk, participants can use this walking style to get the keys. Activities such as these allow participants to pretend and see what it is like through the eyes of the animal.

Other ways to develop a good understanding and empathy for the animals is to learn how they live, what type of shelters they use, and how they keep warm in the winter. A debris hut is essentially the same shelter the squirrel uses. Shelter building is very effective for teaching because the participant learns by doing the activity. Understanding how leaves and other natural elements operate to create a warm, waterproof shelter facilitates a recognition of how animals survive in the wilderness.

Teaching with Questions

Tom Brown Jr., a noted tracker, author, and founder of the wilderness survival and tracking school that bares his name, often refers to a method of teaching known as "Coyote teaching." The coyote in much of native lore is known as the trickster, a very sneaky and underhanded character. As an outdoor educator, you must become the coyote. Many times, participants want their questions answered the moment they ask, and many times, once their question has been answered, they will promptly forget it. They have not invested in their own learning beyond the act of asking.

Participants that are given knowledge do not own that knowledge. Those participants that work for the knowledge will own it. Thus, there exists the common saying "knowledge hard won." The process of coyote teaching is demonstrated in the following example:

> When asked "what tree is that," you, an outdoor educator, respond with the answer. Twenty minutes later that same student turns, points, and asks again "what tree is that?" You turn and look at the student and think to yourself: "well, telling him or her didn't work, so what should I say this time?" You look at the tree, then to the student, and say: "I do not know; let's look at this for a minute." You then begin to ask the student question after question about the tree: what does the bark look like, are the branches opposite or alternate, what type of soil is it growing in, on what side of the hill is the tree

facing. You continue with the questioning and discovery process and end by handing the student a field guide to trees. The student looks up the tree and finds that it is the same tree as the first one about which he or she had asked. The student turns to tell you what it is, thinking that you did not know, and that he or she is now teaching the teacher.

You, as the coyote teacher, have tricked the student into learning it for himself or herself. The student has learned how to answer his or her own questions (the process) and has the pride of owning that knowledge (the content).

As educators, we do not need to demonstrate our knowledge of nature by giving all the answers. As coyote teachers, we can help to bring students or participants into the experience much more deeply and help them to gain the pride from hard won knowledge. The coyote teacher role is not only to assist the participants in finding the answer but also to inspire and trick them into looking more closely at what is around them. The process of discovery is also taught. For example, the teacher says "is that poison ivy?" (knowing that the common vine is Virginia Creeper and has toothed palmate leaves), and all the student circle around looking at it. Some say yes, and some say no. To help them (or trick them) more, you point to the hairs on the vine and how it is attached to the tree, saying "it has to be poison ivy." Then, they all look at you not knowing what to believe and then back to the vine. "Can I see your field guide?" one of the group members asks. You hand it to the group. After a few minutes, the group decides that this is Virginia Creeper, not poison ivy, and that the teacher was wrong. After a few more tricks related to that plant, the group now knows two vines very well and are able to compare them. Both of these examples demonstrate the simplicity of the coyote teaching process. Coyote teaching provides an alternative teaching modality to assist participants in gaining outdoor knowledge. It is a simple and continual process that shifts the responsibility of learning from the educator to the student.

Conclusion

Outdoor education is a very important part of helping people to understand more about the natural environment. Whether it is with an adventure trip program or an environmental education program, wilderness survival can offer many levels of educational lessons as well as skill development. Implementing wilderness survival into outdoor education programs creates multiple benefits for participants. They will not only have a better understanding and comfort level when lost or in potential trouble, but also they will receive the same lessons espoused in typical outdoor education program, if not at a deeper level of understanding when learning about the earth.

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Biographical Sketch

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